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'THE CLOSET'

by

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*A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Film and Animation*

School of Film and Animation

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

December 8th, 2020

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ABSTRACT

The story begins with Sophie, the main character, waking up to find her house completely empty. There is no food and her parents are nowhere to be found. She opens all the doors in the house except one the closet at the end of the hallway. Stepping outside, she finds her town to be likewise abandoned, but largely untouched, for mysterious reasons. Her fear growing, Sophie runs down the street, hoping to find someone, anyone, who can help her.

But there is no one, and when she turns the corner, she finds herself back on the same street as her house. She keeps going, makes the same turn, and again she is back on the same street – caught in a loop. Sophie has no choice, she must go back into her house, and open the one door she couldn't before. The closet.

In her last loop, the world has changed. Everything is de-saturated, dead, and falling apart. Sophie is stunned to find her home to be in a similar state, and the interior is likewise in ill-repair. When Sophie finally opens the closet door, she is horrified to find the bodies of her parents – and herself. A

short flashback reveals Sophie's last moments alive as she and her parents hide, just before the atomic bomb drops.

Shaken by the discovery and in denial, Sophie runs from the closet and hides in her parents' room, climbing into their bed where she huddles and cries. The film ends with a hand of someone new, appearing from off-screen to rouse Sophie. She turns and gasps in shock when she sees them.

INTRODUCTION

For my thesis project, I wanted to tell a ghost story of sorts with the American 1950's as a backdrop. That time period has always held a nostalgic and aesthetic appeal to me, so I wanted to make the setting authentic. In turn, I found that deconstructing the nostalgia of the period added to the theme of my film; the fantasy versus the reality of the 1950's. How the media tends to remember the good parts, the pleasing parts, while forgetting the less savory. Much of my research was focused on this element of filmmaking. I knew I could not create a truly authentic setting if I did not include the social and political atmosphere of the American 1950's, so it became interwoven with the story itself.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

My biggest inspiration for this film was the design and aesthetics of 1950's suburban America. Not just in style, color or shape, but also in the political turmoils behind it all.

I was intrigued by the concept that, as pleasing as this aesthetic and time period is to look at, it's all a thin coat painted across the undercurrent of fear and paranoia in the 1950's – specifically regarding “the Bomb” or nuclear war¹. Such a fear began in the 1940's, when the Americans dropped the first (and only) two nuclear warheads on Japan. Only a few years later, in 1949 would Russia develop their own nuclear weapons². The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was an omen to potential nuclear war; in the advent of Allied victory, America's next opponent reared its head in the form of Russia. They battled in quiet bouts for dominance over territory. The Cold War and all that it threatened heavily influenced the cultural, political, and social mindset of the average American living at the time. Thus, it is something I wanted to include in

¹ Storrs, “McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare”

² “Soviet Atomic Program - 1946.”

my film; An initially picturesque world, under which lies something sinister.

My love for the 1950's (warts and all) might have originated with the video games of my childhood; *Fallout New Vegas* (2010) was a prominent one, set in a post-apocalyptic world forever trapped in the aesthetic and design of the 1950's, including every small device powered by nuclear technology. Another game would be *Bioshock* (2007). Its design is decidedly based on the Art Deco period from the 1920's, but the game itself is set in 1963, giving the entire game a sort of "time capsule" feel. Both games include political and social themes based on the time period they are set in, positive and negative, and something I wished to echo in my own film. To have the aesthetic of Mid-Century Modernism in my film without the dark underbelly would feel too superficial, and given the reveal at the end of my film, would be a waste of storytelling potential.

Both games incidentally dealt with having the Cold War as their political background. In *Bioshock*, the War serves as context as to why there's a city under the sea, a safe haven for those who want to escape; while in the *Fallout* series, it plays front and center as the main crux of why the nuclear apocalypse

even happened. The Cold War went hot, every country launched all of their nuclear warheads, leaving behind a wasteland in which whatever remains survives in the rubble of that civilization. *Fallout* also doesn't shy away from the xenophobia of the era (specifically against anyone and anything vaguely Russian or Communist). The game exaggerates this, as well as American Exceptionalism, to create a sort of tongue-in-cheek heightened reality in the backstory of their world that still echoes in the world players interact with.



Cold War Propaganda Poster (Franceschi-Bicchierai 2018)

The influence of these games spurred my research into propaganda art of the time. I was unsurprised to find that many

of the posters I found were alarmist, warning of the threat of Communism, socialism, Russia and their allies, and the ever-looming threat of atomic devastation. This kind of propaganda lasted for decades due to the length of the Cold War and the wars America was caught up in (Korea, Vietnam), that only heightened this undercurrent of fear over an otherwise prosperous era for the American culture and economy of the 1950's.



Propaganda posters: Atomic War, 1950s; America under Socialism, 1950s. (R 2016)

In part, this art inspired the color palette of my film. I wanted it to be colorful, lively, especially at the start. I thought a warm, inviting atmosphere would generate the nostalgia of the era. Propaganda posters of the time feature a lot of red and fire, with other desaturated colors to make those stand out – this helped determine what the middle and late part of my film would look like, as Sophie's world begins to shift around her and her reality starts to reflect the truth. While the theme of nuclear war and its devastation is not the main point of the film, it informs the context of the story and is something that I want to linger in the back of the audience's mind.

This research also helped me to include smaller details that I feel heightened the overall result; for example, the wallpaper patterns I made for many of the interior shots of Sophie's house. I was more familiar with flat painted walls, so it didn't immediately come to me as something I could, or should, include until I started researching 1950's interior design. I found several wallpaper designs from that era and tried to emulate without copying them. I used mostly floral patterns, which matched the light and airy tone I wanted in the home.

Much of the film's plot development occurred during the main production. I worked extensively with my advisor Vanessa Sweet, who helped me in the more difficult parts of the project, specifically in editing and storytelling. My initial script/animatic was too long, almost seven minutes, something that I had to cut down in order to animate on my own in the time that I had. I wanted my film to be shorter, more efficient in its visual storytelling. I was constantly asking myself if the story still made sense as I took more and more away, and Vanessa helped as a sounding board. Sometimes it was as small as consistency, like a character facing one way when she was facing the other in a previous shot. Or it was more complex, like discussing what would be a realistic reaction to a young girl discovering she and her entire family is dead, and what she would do next. I always struggled with how to end my film, and Vanessa helped me figure out a concise yet empathetic solution.

Vanessa also aided me in finding resources to develop the backgrounds of my film, to create an authentic setting that left no doubt in the audience's mind where and when my film took place. Many of the books I reference in this paper are ones we discovered at RIT's library together.

There were other ideas that she suggested, such as determining the layout of the house, that helped flesh out my story and setting. In this instance, the house layout started originally because I have a short montage of Sophie opening many doors to reveal empty rooms. It had perhaps five or six different rooms, and by that point the outer house design had already been made. Vanessa pointed out that the house I designed was small (enough for the three-person family I envisioned) to fit all these rooms. So along with cutting down the number of doors Sophie opened, I had to determine which rooms she looks into and where they're located in the house. The only room I especially wanted to keep was the parents' bedroom, as that would be returned to later in the film.

Another example was the use of color palettes and how it might change through the film along with the tone, and that Sophie's palette changes with it. The darker, cooler tones were meant to bring in a more foreboding atmosphere. Meanwhile, the initial scenes were bright and warm, not yet revealing what had happened yet. And at the end, the world desaturated and tinged with red to imply the devastation of a nuclear bomb. They were small things, but added up to a world that felt more real.

A more morbid subject I looked into was how to portray realistic dead bodies. My initial animatic of the film featured plain skeletons in the closet for the final reveal of the film. But that imagery was perhaps too on the nose, and unintentionally funny when I wanted it to be scary and horrifying. My research included looking up bodies of burn victims, victims of nuclear attacks, mummified corpses and more, all of which came to play in the final piece. It was important that each figure be recognizable even if they never end up getting a character model/animation of their own. Clothes, even torn up, help connect them to the setting (the original skeletons didn't have clothes). The body language they showed was integral, showing both their terror and protectiveness in their last moments alive.

Part of my research into the aesthetic of the 1950's included going through old architectural and design books of the period, taking pictures of fabric patterns, houses, furniture, and redrawing them in a sketchbook. I really wanted to understand the kind of shapes that were used most often in that period, to capture the sense of what made this particular vase or that kind of lamp a clear product of its time. I wanted to be able to recreate these designs without necessarily copying them

in order to create a realistic, fleshed out setting in my film. The Mid-Century Modern aesthetic has a very specific look to it that I wanted to capture and recreate convincingly. The style of Mid-Century Modern featured a lot of organic shapes, in a similar vein to abstract art. The furniture wasn't ornate, but minimalist. Solid colors were common, and the use of patterns seemed to be relegated to furniture and upholstery. Smaller items like tea pots or vases tended to be unadorned.

In doing so, I filled a sketchbook with rough sketches of the basic shapes and designs I found in those books, as seen here:



Photo: Page from my sketchbook, part 1

I enjoyed how shapes became very organic, abstract in many ways. While I didn't use color in these sketches, I made note of the use of bright palettes, including many pastels, when going through these resources. I made sure to draw a little bit of everything: home decor, seats, chairs, tables, clocks, lamps, whatever home appliances popped up, as well as cutlery and dishware.

As I was developing the world of the film, however, it occurred to me how unnatural it might seem if *everything* in the film, from the furniture to the cars, would be made in the 1950's. It's simply unrealistic, when homes and families are built on the past. There would be older furniture that was inherited, houses built earlier when architecture trends were different; what might an average American family be able to afford from the new wave of technology and design? Their phones and refrigerator might be new, but their beds and couches and chairs might be older, and more expensive/less feasible to simply replace.

I was reminded of the way my family inherited things from my own grandparents, old tables and furniture that is just as well-made and beautiful as current-made objects, but hold sentimental value, as well as being a cost-saver. Why buy new when you've inherited or been gifted perfectly good furniture?



Photo: Page from my sketchbook, part 3

My intention was that the house was new, the wallpaper was new, the decor, all the small things that would be cheap would be of the latest trends; while heavier, pricier items would be of an older generation. Things like technology, fridges, phones, clocks, would be more on the modern side. This was a family of average, middle-class means and would not be able to afford to simply replace everything for the modern update.

Another aspect that influenced my attention to background was the work of background artists in films like *Star Wars* (1977), which feature incredible painted backgrounds made to look so realistic that they deceive the viewer into believing its an actual set. The matte landscape paintings were done by artists Chris Evans, Mike Pangrazio, Frank Ordaz, Harrison Ellenshaw, and Ralph McQuarrie, painted onto glass. The pieces were so seamless that when filmed in live-action, it appeared the actors were actually moving in the same space.

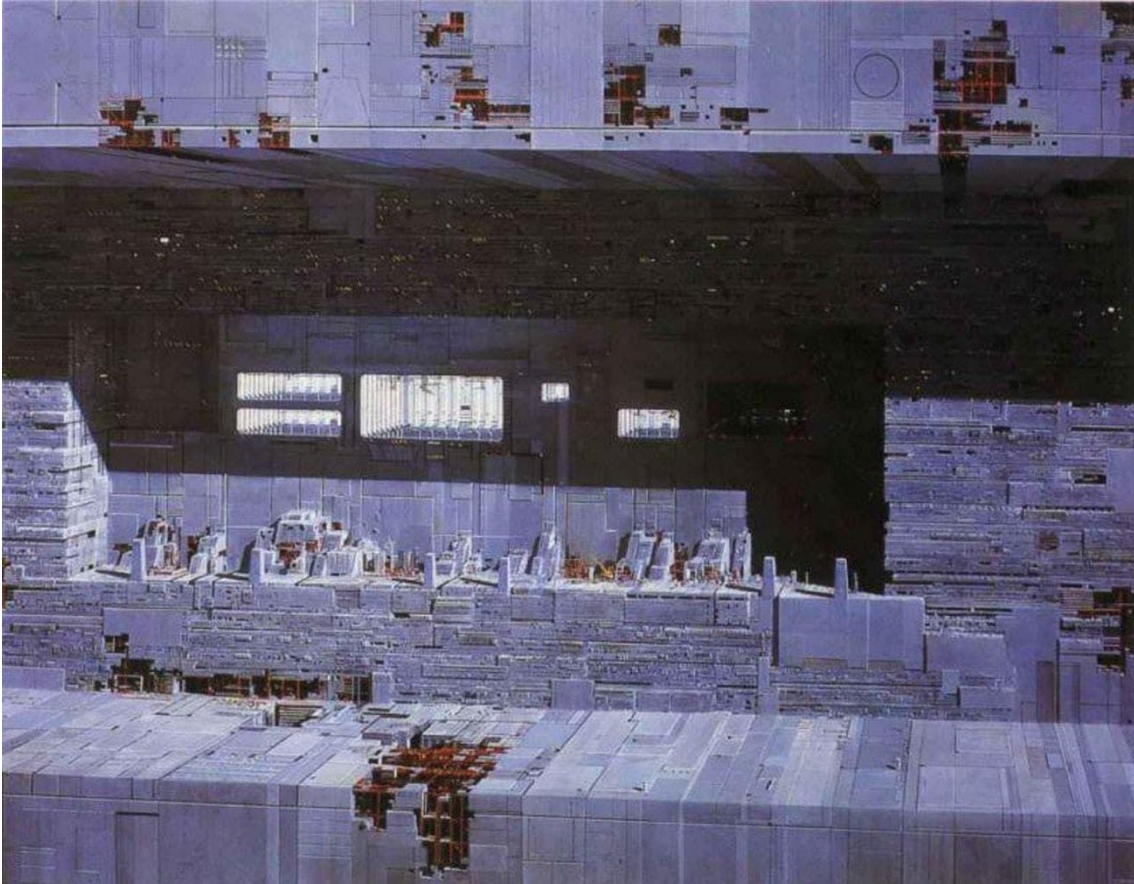
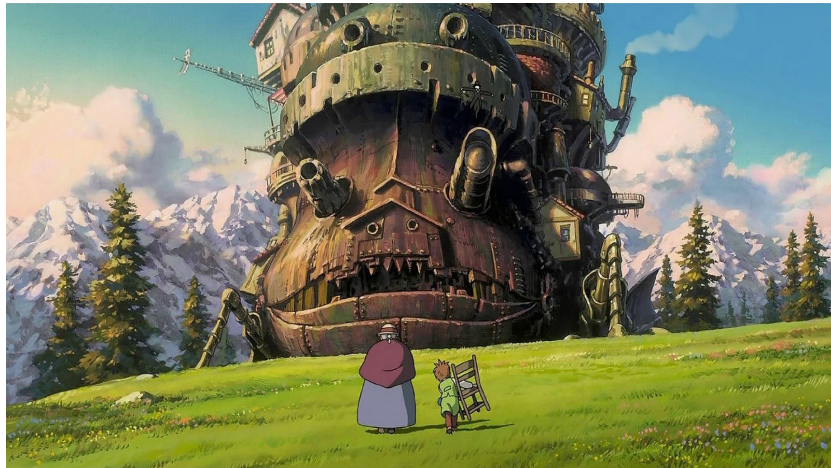


Photo: Return of the Jedi / 20th Century Fox. (Seastrom 2020)

The level of rendering and attention to detail in the artwork done by ILM as a whole inspired the backgrounds in my film, which I wanted to be highly rendered. With the setting so important to the context and framing of the story, much of my time in pre-production was spent on these backgrounds, rendering them as deeply as I could.

I was also influenced by animators like Hayao Miyazaki, of Studio Ghibli, who's lush animation style and backgrounds, rich

use of color and fantastic world elements and backgrounds always brought a sense of wonder and whimsy to his films.



Movie Still: Howl's Moving Castle (Miyazaki, 2004)

Barefoot Gen (1983) directed by Mori Masaki, was another film that influenced the depiction of a nuclear attack in my piece. I viewed it for the first time in a Japanese film class I took while at RIT, and it has stuck with me the longest of all the films I'd seen. Its visceral and unflinching depiction of people suffering and dying via atomic bomb and its fallout (rendered all the more horrifying in animation), the very whiplash of the story's turning point felt very akin to what I was trying to do with *The Closet*. The beginning of *Barefoot Gen* starts out fairly light-hearted, two brothers and their family going about their lives in the city of Hiroshima. There are vague mentions of the war that is occurring in the background,

such as the father expressing criticism of it, but the theme is very much in the background, as Gen and his brother search for ways to feed their struggling family. It's brightly colored and cheerful, with emphasis on the beauty of nature and the architecture of the city. The atmosphere of the story thus far is slice-of-life, no real conflict except the characters going through their day-to-day lives. And then the bomb is dropped and everything, from the story's tension to the color palette, changes in an instant. The initial sequence of the bomb dropping and the direct aftermath is difficult to watch, and while I didn't want to go that far in my own film, the emotional effect is something I want to emulate; A creeping uneasiness before the terrible imagery arrives.

My film also focuses on themes of ghosts and the afterlife; the reveal given near the very end of the film reframes the entire story and helps explain how and why Sophie is going through this experience. I've always had a fascination with ghosts and given my other themes of 1950's nostalgia and nuclear war, it was only natural I also discuss the topic of death in my film. While nuclear war is more background element, the

ghost/death aspect is at the forefront and is where Sophie reaches her breaking point.

I didn't want to be too explicit/graphic in the death of the family (and their community) but I did not want it to simply be implied, either. The visual imagery of the corpses had to be there, otherwise I don't think the impact would have been as strong. During the course of the film, Sophie goes through the five stages of grief. The first: denial, in which she nor the audience fully understand what is going on. She still sees the world as it once was in her memory, her beloved childhood clean and untouched. But even in denial she cannot fully block out the truth; her parents are mysteriously absent and the neighborhood is completely void of life.

Anger and bargaining are not specifically represented, but Sophie features two different stages before she hits depression; first, running away from her house, searching for anyone, anything. She finds herself trapped in a loop she cannot escape. The more Sophie runs the more the world changes, until it represents the reality she is trying to deny. All ruined, dilapidated, sapped of life and color. Then at last, Sophie must face her fears, and discover what's waiting for her on the other

side of the closet door. When she steps back inside her home, it's no longer as picture-perfect as it was before. When confronted with the reality that she – and her parents – are dead, Sophie tries to deny it further. She is wracked by grief and seeks comfort where she can find it, by going to her parent's bedroom, as she might have whenever she had a nightmare. But her parents still aren't there, so Sophie huddles within their covers, and cries.

Finally, acceptance comes at the very last moment, when a hand belonging to someone else gently rouses her. It's the only other character seen on screen, and is the spot of hope at a very grim time. As a filmmaker and storyteller, I couldn't cheapen Sophie and her family's death, nor the gravity of what caused it. Giving her a happy ending in any sense felt wrong, but I still wanted the proverbial "light at the end of the tunnel". Sophie's consciousness, her soul, still exists in this plane of reality. Thus, so can others as well. While the audience never learns who the hand belongs to, Sophie's reaction to seeing their face hints that she recognizes them. Perhaps her mother?

The point of death viewed through the eyes of a child was very important to display for me. I wanted to incorporate her innocence, how her youth would affect her understanding of what death means, and how she would face that reality when it happens to her. Would a ghost of a child know she's dead? Would she remember how she died? Or would her young mind try to protect her and project a reality that is comforting and safe? I did not want Sophie to have an adult perception or experience of death; she's vulnerable, emotional, easily lost without the guidance of her parents. How would she fare in an afterlife when there are no adults there to help her and protect her? Her psyche must do the extra work until Sophie can no longer avoid the truth.

PROCESS

I chose to make my piece a narrative 2D animated short, as that had been the focus of my study at RIT. A thesis project requires at least two semesters to complete during the last year at RIT, with one-on-one mentoring with a faculty thesis advisor.

The initial stage in beginning my thesis project was composing a proposal, done in the semester before the final year begins.

In the very early stages, the story of my film was much different, although the core idea was the same: a little girl looking for her family, learning they are all dead, and coming to terms with it. Essentially, a ghost story. The previous version still had the nuclear war undertones, but instead of the 1950's, the atmosphere was more focused on nature, plants and animals retaking the destroyed and abandoned human civilization. There was a more environmentalist theme to it, as nature was now thriving. It was quite lengthy and the message was confused, as well as the secret twist being too obvious from the start. I ended up falling onto the 1950's setting as I found myself intrigued by the political atmosphere at the time; the reality of the Cold War and Red Scare playing in the background of what, on the face of it, seemed to be an idyllic time in American culture and

history. Thus, I found the setting that fit the mood I wanted. Both peaceful and aesthetically pleasing, but devoid of human life.

In the storyboarding phase I knew right away that a lot of emphasis would be put into the backgrounds/scenery, so I planned to make use of shots and framing to help illustrate the world Sophie was in. Sophie herself had to also be a product of her era, and help invoke the theme. For her character design, I knew I wanted it to be a little girl, around 6-9 years old; mature enough to understand what's going on, but still young enough to maintain a naïveté and childlike innocence, a lens to view her world through.

Since the story begins with everything appearing normal, just the start of another day, Sophie is dressed in a nightgown; the designs of her nightwear is based off of children's pajama designs of the 1950's, as well as my own childhood. My grandmother often sewed clothes for me and my brothers when we were younger, and I have fond memories of a plaid nightgown with a lacy collar and cuffs, and poofy sleeves. I wanted to carry over that feeling of nostalgia and comfort, as is often associated with the American 1950's setting.

Sophie's color palette was based on the personality I wanted her to have. She doesn't have any dialogue, so it can

only be displayed visually. I liked a soft, feminine blue for her dress that evokes both innocence and an emotional vulnerability. I didn't want to use any warm colors because it would describe a more aggressive, outgoing personality than how Sophie was truly acting. Throughout the film, she's tired, curious, afraid, panicked, and torn apart. When she's essentially going through the stages of grief, a sentimental color felt appropriate. I included a headband to help add a little balance to her appearance. Her eyes were also going to be the same blue, but for the sake of simplicity in animation, I kept them a solid black, or the same color of her lineart.

Color was also a way to help give atmosphere. From a bright morning to a richly colored home and neighborhood, to a gradual shift into something eerie and grayer, to the literal darkest moment of the film, and once more into something brighter, when the film ends on a spot of hope. It was fun to experiment with color, as well as how it affected Sophie, whose colors were also affected depending on the filter she was put through. Especially in the darker scenes, I found that I had to play with the colors of her lineart to help her pop from the background better.

For animating, I used a combination of TVPaint, Adobe Photoshop, After Effects, and Premiere to compose and complete my work. TVPaint was the software I used for the animation, while

Photoshop served as my canvas for composing all of my backgrounds. After Effects and Premiere served for lighting and filter effects, piecing together different shots, and playing with special effects. For sound, I knew I would not have any voice acting, given that I only had one character and she has no internal monologue. I wanted the focus to be on the music to help tell the story, add to the atmosphere, whether pleasant or tense or scary. Sound effects were standard, except for the closet scene, where they play the biggest role in telling a part of the story that I did not illustrate outright. The air raid sirens were specific, helping explain why the family would be hiding in the closet to begin with, where they were in their last moments alive.

I had issues with some of the backgrounds; sometimes maintaining consistency, sometimes reframing so focal points were better perceived. In the first act, Sophie is clearly avoiding opening the closet door at the end of the hall. It looms in the deep background of several frames, and each time Sophie turns away. I had to be careful to make sure the door was the darkest element, or in the deepest shadows of the frame, as well as in or near the center.

Because wallpapers ended up being a considerable part of my background construction, I ended up making a number of my own brushes in Photoshop to ease the strain of decorating each wall in every image. My first attempt was hand-drawing every detail, which was very time-consuming. Making my own brushes/stamps allowed me to create a

more realistic symmetry and identical form for wallpapers, and allowed me to create shapes and stretch and skew them as I needed to fit onto angled walls. Overall, it sped up the process immensely so I did not have to spend hours detailing every inch of wallpaper.

When putting together my animatic, I had to consider the layout of the house. In the first act of the film, there's a quick montage of Sophie opening several doors in search of her parents. In early drafts, there were a lot more doors, and a lot more rooms, than in the final version. I realized that a house as small as I was planning (standard suburban home for a small family of three) would not have or need that many rooms. It also created more work for myself to draw that many shots for rooms that would never be seen again. So I drew out a map of the house, both floors, the rooms, and the path Sophie walks throughout the film. I pared down the montage shots to three, one of which will come back later as the parent's bedroom in which Sophie retreats to after the reveal.

Another technical issue I had was with some of the lighting effects I wanted. The film gradually changes, and some parts I painted into the background by hand. The lighting effects of the closing closet door in the flashback sequence, however, had to be animated. It took me different variations and attempts to get it right. My original concept was that the only visible light was the thin beam of light through the crack in the door, that grew brighter and brighter until it overtakes everything, creating a white out

transition. The transition itself isn't difficult, but having it emerge from the crack took some finagling. I also wanted it to have a specific timing; it wasn't a steady increase of brightness, but begins slowly, before increasing dramatically.

To do this, I took the shot into After Effects, created a white box inserted into the doorframe where it was virtually invisible. Adding a glow effect allowed me to change and alter it on the timeline, and to create just the right glow and intensity at the speed I needed.

I had issues in my initial timeline that I constructed for my film, underestimating both how much work I had made myself to animate as well as how long it would take to do it all on my own. Because there was a specific design I wanted for my backgrounds, I did not want to outsource my work to others. I also had a pretty limited budget and could not afford to hire anyone outside of the composer who collaborated on this film. I had enough skill in sound to be able to do my own sound effects, but I had little experience in music or soundtracks. I wanted an original, unique score for my film, so I hired composer Rasoul Morteza of Universal Sound to collaborate.

If I had to do it on my own, I most likely would have had to use free resources and premade scores which were not specifically made for this film. This was an extreme last resort and I wanted to avoid having to do that.

Initially, I was going to collaborate with a music student from Eastman School of Music. It worked well with my budget as it was a trade-off for mutual experience/grades rather than monetary payment. RIT and Eastman arrange a showcase for their students to allow both to collaborate and gain experience in their respective films; this is how I met what I thought would be the composer for this film.

I knew I could illustrate and I knew I could animate so I took on the entire visual process on my own. I wanted to test and push myself to my limit, to show everything that I had learned both as an artist and an animator at RIT. So I had to rethink my timeline and give myself more realistic time-slots for each step of the production process, fitting within the year I had to make everything. I remember being told that I *could* add the weeks of my vacation time into it, but that students rarely ever actually did that. Due to early poor planning, I ended up working on my thesis throughout December and early January. I focused on my backgrounds, which I had fallen behind in, as well as getting started on animation.

In the end, the pandemic that had occurred effectively threw my timeline up into the air. Students in my department were very generously offered an extra semester to finish their projects, which I readily took. When I originally should have screened in May 2020, I am now screening in December 2020, which is also when I'll be graduating. The extra time I was given was unprecedented, and I understand that in this aspect I am very lucky as Masters' students

before me did not have this kind of time to fully complete their film. Because of this boon, I took it upon myself to make as much use of this extra time as possible to make *The Closet* the best film I could make.

The pandemic also affected the collaboration with my composer from Eastman. Because dorms were closing across the nation, we were both heading home and he could no longer compose as he did not have the equipment the school provided. Thus, I was once more at a loss and had to look elsewhere for music.

I found composer Rasoul Morteza of Universal Scoring, on the website Soundbetter.com. It is a resource and social media website that allows composers and sound designers to offer their wares, and allow users like me to offer projects that need work. While I could not afford the full cost of a composition, I offered to pay about 2/3rds while including my own skills in creating an album cover, poster, etc, in exchange for the work. He accepted and thus began our collaboration. Luckily, the pandemic did not affect it.

He was deeply helpful and understood the needs of the film; because I did not know much about composing scores, I was satisfied with some experimenting and creative liberty in finding the right sound for *The Closet*. Rasoul composed an orchestral piece that I found to fit the mood of my film very well. I did not want the true tone of the film, with its horror and suspense elements, to be revealed too soon. Instead, I wanted a lighter, softer atmosphere at

the beginning, to imply a normal, picturesque world that Sophie is waking up to.

I was very pleased with the turnout of the score. The timing was close but the final version was completed within a week of the film's due date. I consider it to be the best version of the film I could present with the time and resources I had.

EVALUATION

Throughout the creation of my film, I met countless times with my thesis advisor, Vanessa Sweet. She provided a lot of help and guidance that made for significant and beneficial changes to my film, in a way that would not be the same without.

As mentioned before, the very first version of the film's narrative had a very different take to it. This was the version I presented at the end of my second year to my thesis committee, who noted the length of it as well as the easy-to-guess conclusion, which I had intended to be a surprise reveal. The first changes began there. I believe the new tone for *The Closet* matches what I want to say about nuclear war, the 1950's, and the afterlife.

Even after I changed the narrative, a remaining issue was simply how long the animation would be. A personal issue with writing and storyboarding is that I tend to make things longer than they have to be. Much of the process was helping me pare down a lot of the shots I had into something concise and clear; my original treatment would've been somewhere in the five-to-seven minute animation range, which would have been extremely difficult to animate on my own. Bringing it down to

three minutes not only lightened my workload and gave me a dose of reality, but improved the story overall.

Along with changing the initial setting and story into something set within the 1950's, Vanessas urged me to keep pushing it. I should narrow down the setting to a time, a place, a location within the United States. I set onto a suburban town in Massachusetts, a made-up place near the Appalachian mountains; a familiar setting for me and, hopefully, for the audience as well, even if only through cultural osmosis. I wanted the setting to evoke the traditional, pop-culture idea of the 1950's before slowly turning that on its head.

I was also pushed to give more and more attention into detail of Sophie's expressions and body language – without dialogue, it's her only way of communicating with the audience. Even down to her eye movements, and which muscles on her face moved first when her expression changed. As a result, much of my most detailed animation has gone into close-up shots of Sophie's face, hoping to give her the character that I otherwise cannot illustrate through dialogue or character interaction.

During screenings, I got much helpful feedback on the reception of my film. Overall, I was not blindsided by any judgement, I already knew most of the strengths and weaknesses of my film. Thus, I was not surprised to hear the general consensus that the highly rendered backgrounds did not fully mesh with my more simplistic animation. I knew already that my painting/rendering skills were much more advanced than my animating. My backgrounds were also a point of compliment and most seemed to enjoy them.

Another critique regarding animation was the linework on Sophie, particularly the dark outline of her character. One viewer thought it was too dark and separated her too much from the background as to feel disconnected. While in some scenes I did change Sophie's color and lines to match the tone of a particular scene she was in, her base palette was indeed very dark and did not shift much. It would be a relatively simple change to make in the future.

One concerning point brought up was a bit of confusion regarding a scene change. In the beginning, the part where Sophie reaches and pulls away from the closet door, which then cuts to her outside the house. Because there was no transitional shot of her moving away from the closet to the front door, it

led to confusion as to what door she was opening, or what was behind the closet. I understood this confusion and it was a mistake on my part; in the original storyboard/animatic, there was originally a shot that married the two scenes but it ended up cut out for time. Over time, I could have added it back into the film as I had shortened it to the point where an extra shot would not have hurt. Unfortunately, the film was so far along that it had never occurred to me to revisit some old shots.

Overall, no one seemed confused about the direction of the story or any of the beats I kept. I was very pleased for it to be described as compelling, and the ending had a positive reaction. Leaving it open-ended seemed like the right choice after all. One commentor thought I could've made the build-up to the reveal even longer, to create more tension and anticipation. Specifically, I could have had camera movements in that revealing shot of the closet, showing different parts of the decaying space, before panning over the bodies, and finally landing on Sophie. I found this to be very helpful, and something I will consider adding in the future if I have the time to make any changes.

In the end, I was very happy with the reception I received. My greatest worry had been that the narrative wasn't strong or

easy to understand. So much of my production had been spent on editing scenes, and deciding which ones should be cut. I perhaps cut a bit too much in one instance with the front door element, but I don't think it's so bad as to affect the whole film.

CONCLUSION

This film, and my thesis year in general, has been a culminating experience for me. I cannot think of a single project I've ever put so much time, sweat, and blood into. *The Closet* required every skill I learned while at RIT, including a few more I had to learn on the fly to make this the best possible film I could present. I faced a few unexpected setbacks; the pandemic being one of them, and I used that extra time gratefully allotted to me and other students to improve this film well beyond what it might have been before.

I surprised myself with how deep I had to dig for this film, in terms of personal experience that I ended up inserting into the film. Mostly the small details, but details that mean a lot to me. The 1950's was my grandparents' generation, the height of their adulthood, and I wish I still had them in my life. To be able to hear their personal experience, the stories they never got to tell me, is something that I miss. I regret not being able to show them how far I've come and what I've achieved, made with my own hands. In a way, this film has helped reconnect me with them, on an emotional level. If they ever got

to see it, I hope that they would find the authenticity and honesty about the 1950's that I was trying to portray.

APPENDIX

"The Closet"

Renee Levasseur

Film Thesis

September 3rd, 2019

Logline:

A young girl wakes up and finds herself alone, before going on a search for her family and discovers she has lost more than she realizes.

Treatment:

A girl wakes up in a bed, in what appears to be her bedroom; she is small, with short red hair and a simple blue dress, appearing around six or seven years old. It is daytime, golden sunlight streaming in from the open window, gauzy curtain wafting

slightly on a breeze. She rubs her eyes sleepily before slowly slipping out of bed and heads downstairs (off-frame).

At the base of the stairs having just come down, she looks around and heads into the kitchen. The atmosphere is calm, peaceful, but very quiet. Although it is daytime, the house is dark and empty. She goes into the kitchen, but there is no one there. There are old dishes in the sink, and place settings on the table.

She calls out for her parents, but gets no reply. The girl checks the living room, and on her way spots the closet at the end of the hall. A nervous look flits across her face, before she continues in her search.

A short montage of the girl opening doors and revealing a variety of tidy, but empty rooms. As more rooms appear empty, the girl's search becomes more frantic, opening doors faster, her breathing increasing. She calls out again for her parents, but again gets no reply.

Finally, she gives up, curling up on the floor in the main hallway, hands over her head with doors ajar around her. Except for one. She looks towards the door leading outside, then hesitates. She glances back to the closet door the opposite way. It seems to loom ominously, far back in the darkness. The girl looks back to the sunlight streaming through the front door, decides to go outside instead.

She steps outside; it's fresh, summer, warm. Bright colors are everywhere, and as the girl looks around, the neighborhood is picturesque. There are pristine cars parked alongside the

street, flowers blooming in flower boxes, birds twittering in trees and bushes...

But there is absolutely no one in sight.

A lawnmower appears abandoned in the middle of mowing an overgrown lawn. There are children's toys left abandoned in other lawns. Several cars are simply abandoned in the middle of the street. A hose is left on a pathway, spewing water out into the grass as if forgotten.

The girl frowns to herself, walking down the pathway and towards the sidewalk. But no one appears, and she begins to move faster, her pace picking up speed, until soon she's running down the street, her head switching back and forth, searching for anyone who might still be around.

Suddenly, as she's running, a house comes into view --- her own house, the one left behind only a few seconds ago. The girl stumbles at the sight of it, surprised. But then she shakes her head, and keeps running.

But it's only a few more houses before it appears again. The girl starts to look a little panicked, her eyes widening, but this time she does not stop or stumble. Instead, she picks up speed, turning her face away, scrunched up in denial, and continues on.

Her home reappears only seconds later, quicker this time, as if refusing to be ignored. This time, with tears in her eyes,

the girl skids to a stop. She bends over, panting, catching her breath, before straightening. She faces the house.

Zoom in on the front door, cut and zoom to the unopened closet door lying within. The girl's breath is shallow and trembling; she knows that she has to go inside, but fears what she might find. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath to steel her nerves.

After a long moment, she finally takes a step forward. Then another.

Cut to the interior. The girl peers in through the front door, expression pinched in worry. The closet door is still there, at the other end of the hall. Although all is silent, it seems to radiate a kind of energy, a sort of low humming. With cautious steps, the girl approaches the door, traveling across the long, narrow hallway, passing the open doors she had already checked before.

Her trembling hand rises to take the doorknob. It creaks, old and unused, as she turns the knob, and opens the closet door slowly.

When her eyes land on what's inside, the girl gasps, her face horror stricken.

Inside, huddled on the floor, are three skeletons --- two adult, arms around each other, and a smaller child skeleton between them. The girl blinks, and a flash of light brings up a quick flashback.

The flashback features the girl cowering on the floor of the closet, her parents closing the door. Although it is distant and muffled, one can make out the sound of sirens outside. The girl's eyes watch the bottom of the door, where the only light seeps in. With no warning, it flashes, a boom reverberating the floor, canceling out all other sound, and the light increases to the point of blinding, washing out everything else from view.

The girl blinks again, and she's back in the present. Horror and grief mix across her face as the truth finally hits her. Unable to bear the sight or revelation, the girl attempts to flee, stumbling backwards and falling. She scrambles away, and goes to the only place she feels is safe.

Her bedroom.

She flies back up the stairs, and the audience hears a door slam. Cut to the girl back under her covers, where the film first began. She is hunched, shaking, weeping, as the sun filters in from outside. She clutches her stuffed animal to her chest as she hides, as if this were all some terrible nightmare she can't wake from.

Outside, the day rolls on in a brief montage. The audience watches as shadows shift across the ground, focused on the abandoned objects lying on lawns. A pair of child roller-skates. A car parked out on the street. A tree, with a tire swing swaying gently in the wind. The sun dips lower into the sky, heading towards evening. Everything is as picturesque as before, but a hollow wind blows through, and little sound plays beyond

ambient nature noises --- a haunting reminder that the life that once resided here is long gone.

Returning to the girl, her crying has lessened but she has not moved from her spot. She keeps her eyes squeezed shut, unable to bear the sight outside, another reminder of the truth.

But, as she's huddled there, her vision obscured by her blanket over her head, a hand appears behind her, and comes to rest gently on top.

The girl gasps, picking her head up and looking around at the newcomer. For a second, she stares, tearful and bewildered.

Cut to black. The film ends.

Rationale:

I'm inspired by the aesthetic of the American 1950's --- not just its fashion and culture, but also the worries of a nuclear attack, that even in peacetime the political air was always tinged with fear. The 1950's tend to be overidealized, considered a sort of Golden Age, but at the same time the average citizen was haunted by the notion that a single devastating bomb could wipe out an entire city, that in winning a World War, they have also brought the terrifying capabilities of nuclear weapons. It's a turning point you can never return from.

That sort of haunting is what I wanted to emphasize on, as well as the idea that, even in all that death and destruction, life, the world, continues. Although there is a lack of human life,

the wildlife still remains, returning after some indeterminable amount of time.

I do want there to be a kind of melancholy about it, since it also represents a loss on humanity's part. The world is beautiful, and what the humans have created is so peaceful and pristine, that some unseen war or attack devastated everything else. I played with a lot of ideas of how the girl discovered she learns she is a ghost, and I decided to leave the ending ambiguous, but a little bit hopeful. Is the hand her parent, is it another ghost? Even if she is dead, there can be solace in not being alone.

I also wanted to avert the "It's just a dream" scenario that cheapens the reveal, making sure to emphasize that the girl is awake while she hides in bed, going back to the outside world to show that what she saw wasn't a fabrication, either. The ending is deliberately vague, to allow a hopeful end to an otherwise melancholy/tense story, and to let the audience come to their own conclusion.

Vision:

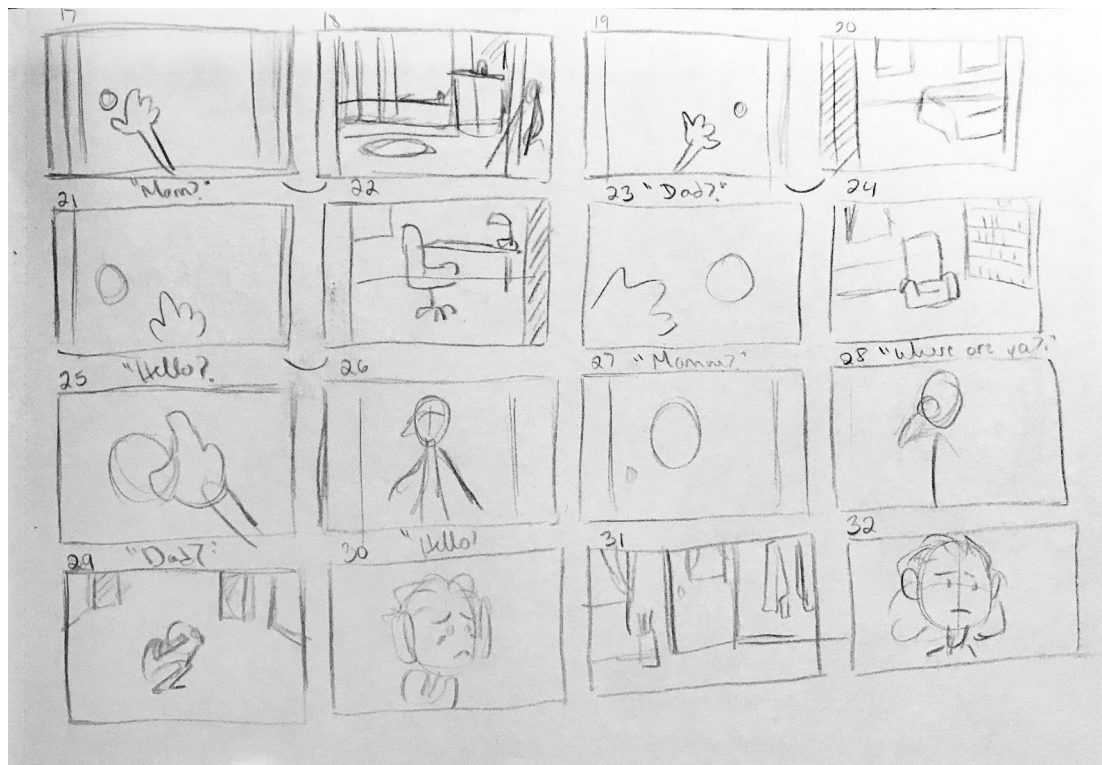
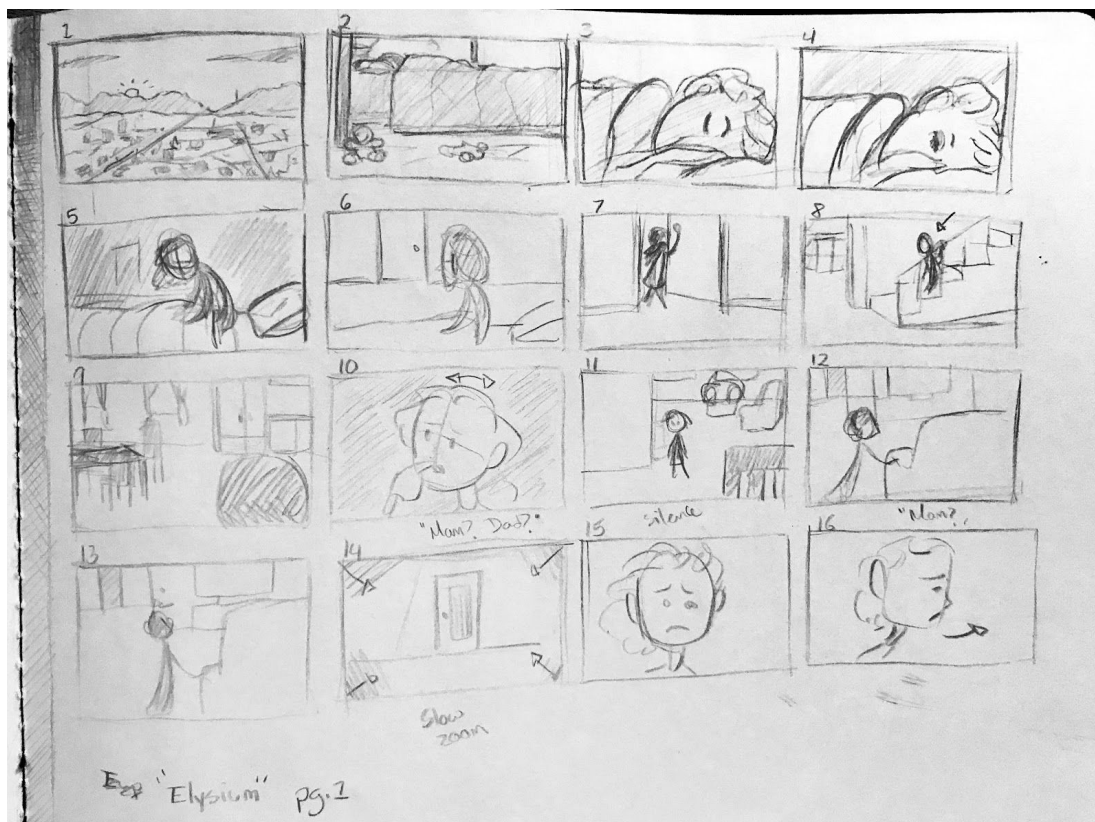
My piece will be done in 2D animation. Since it is entirely visual storytelling, a lot of emphasis and detail will go into the backgrounds of each scene; the setting is just as important as the main character in this piece. My visuals will draw from 1950's color schemes. For my main character, I'm thinking of a simple but expressive face, as that will be a large portion of how the audience reads her thoughts and emotions, along with her body language.

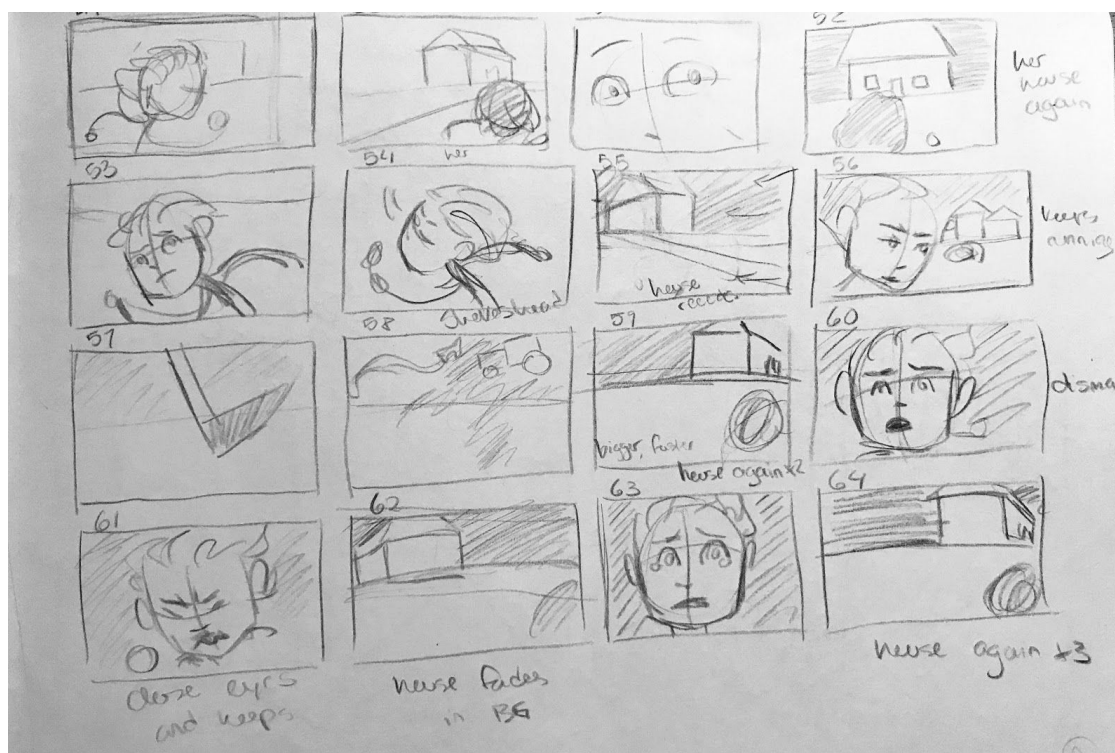
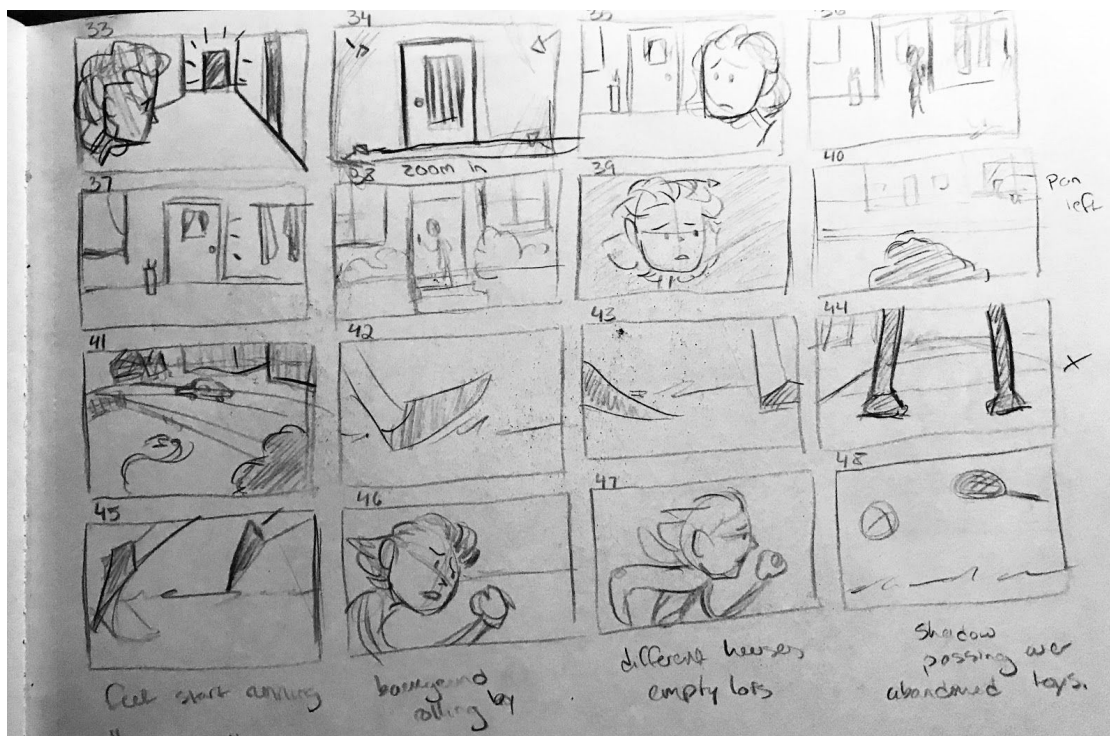
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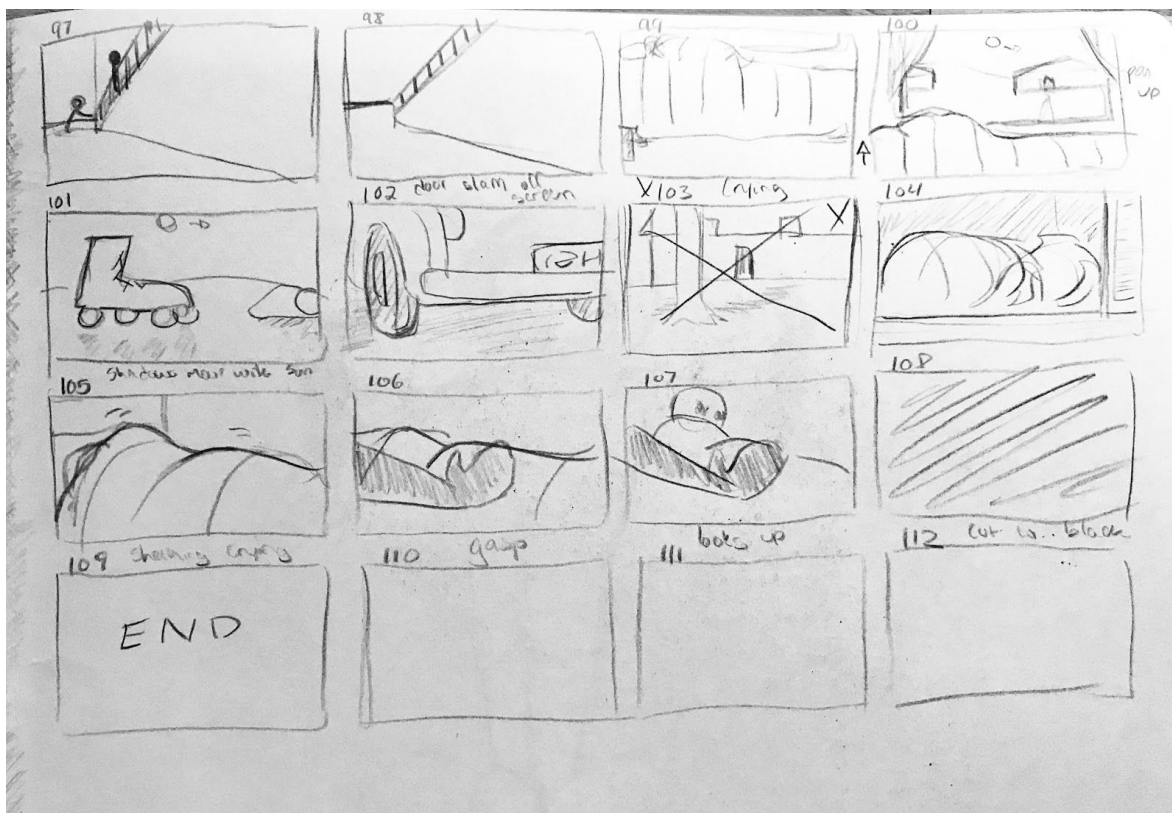
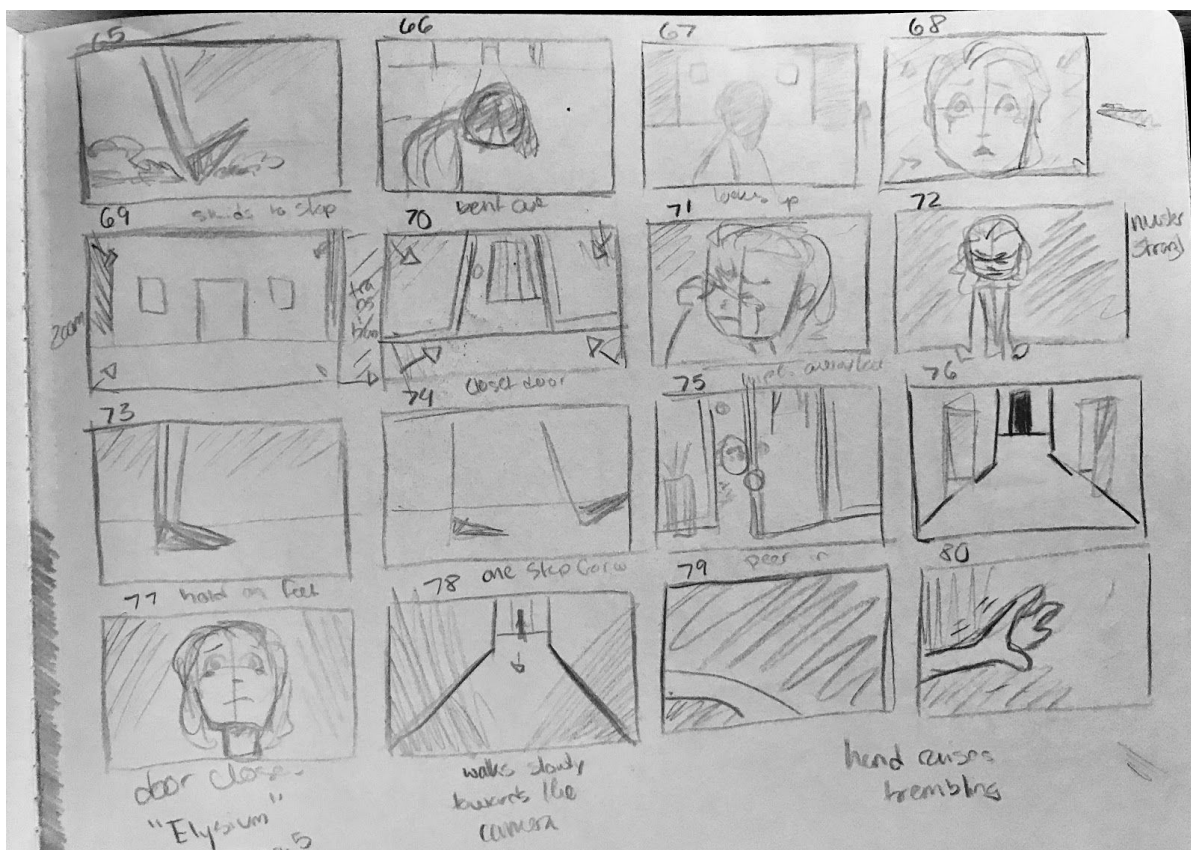
Aside from myself, a composer, and the guidance of my thesis committee, I have no one else working on this film. I will be largely using my own tools that I have at home, since I already have most of what I need to start production and animating on my own.

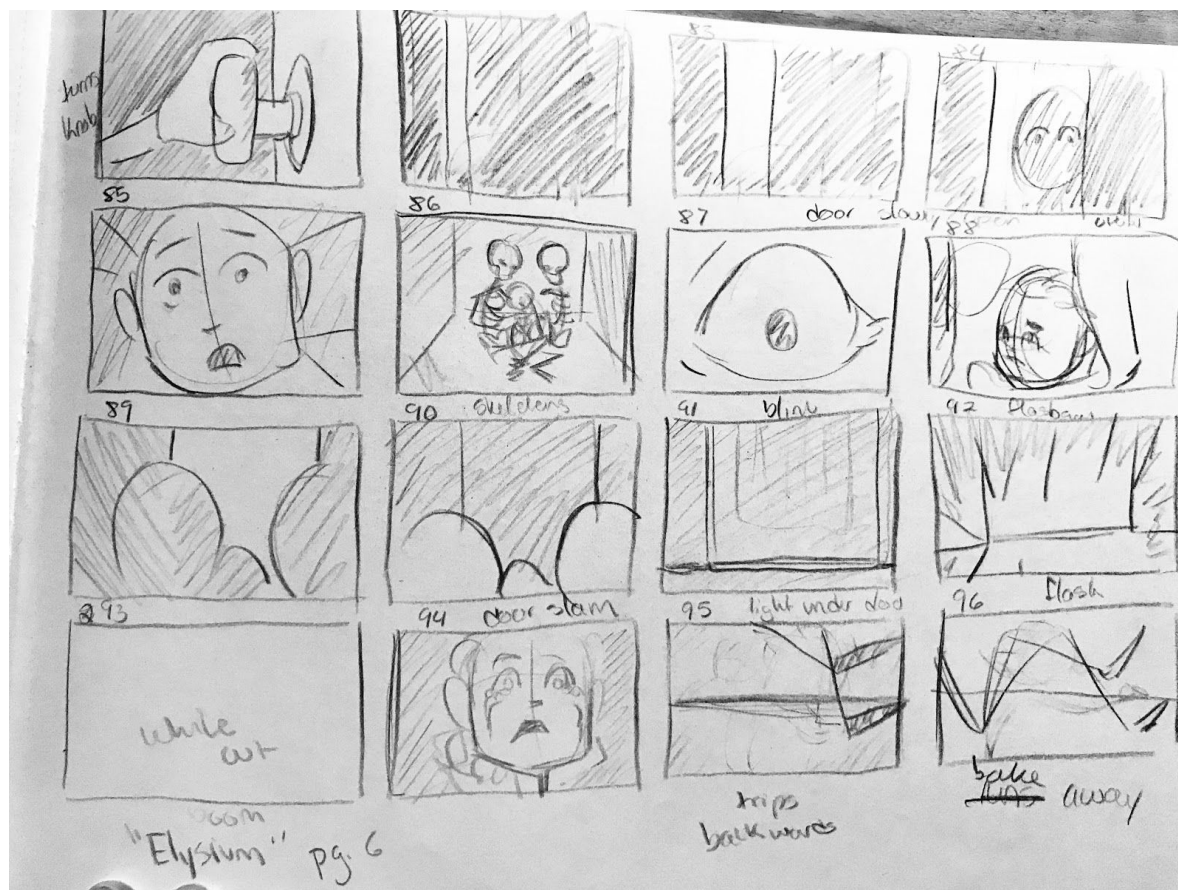
Preparation:

I've completed the required thesis preparation so far, taking all the required classes for my curriculum and completed two previous short films.









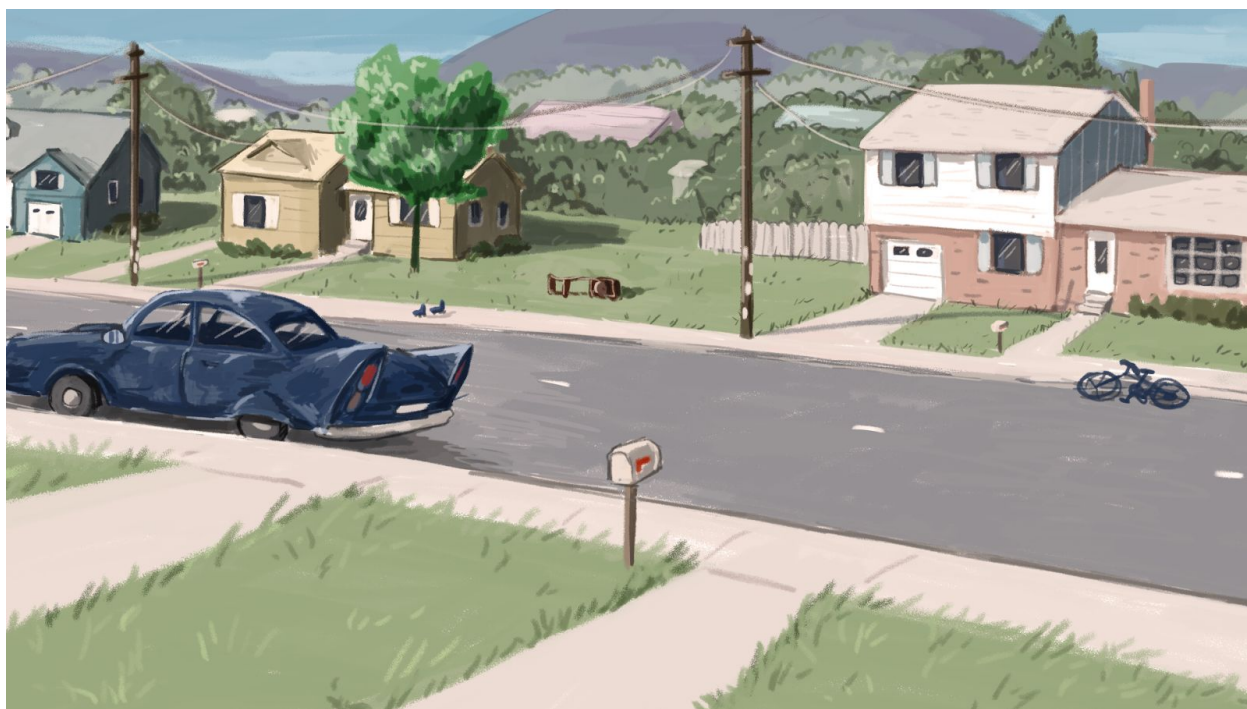
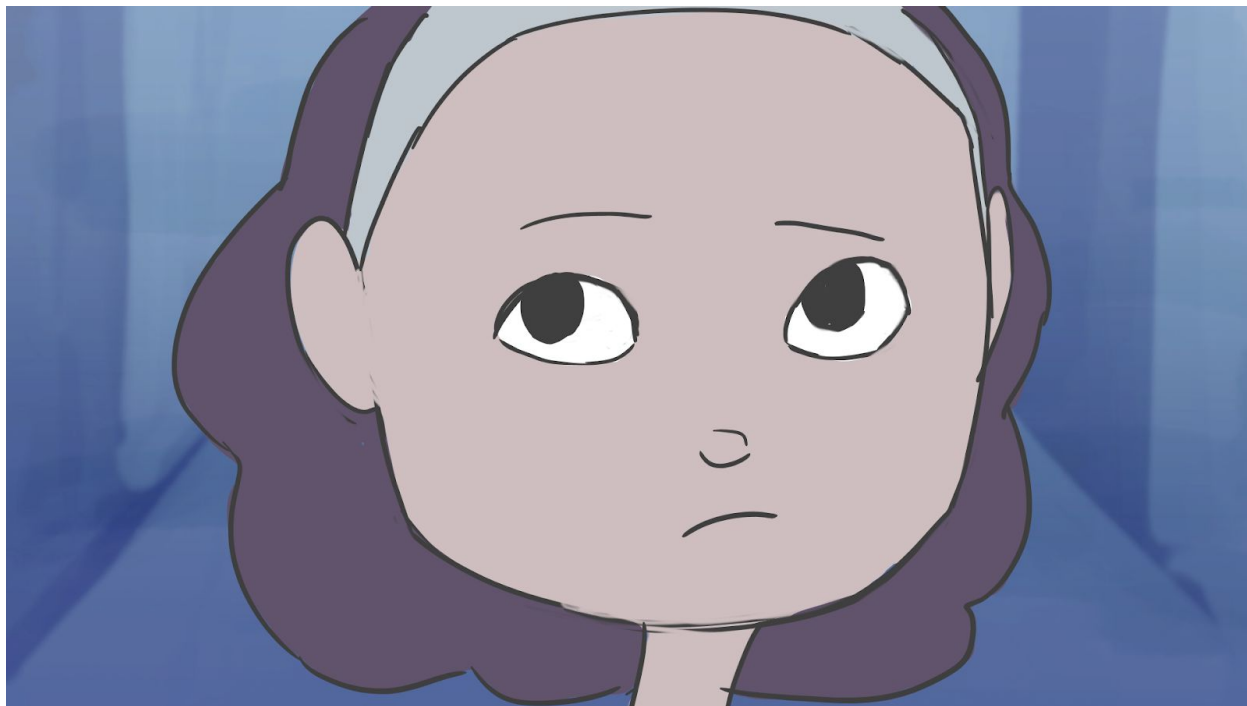


The Closet

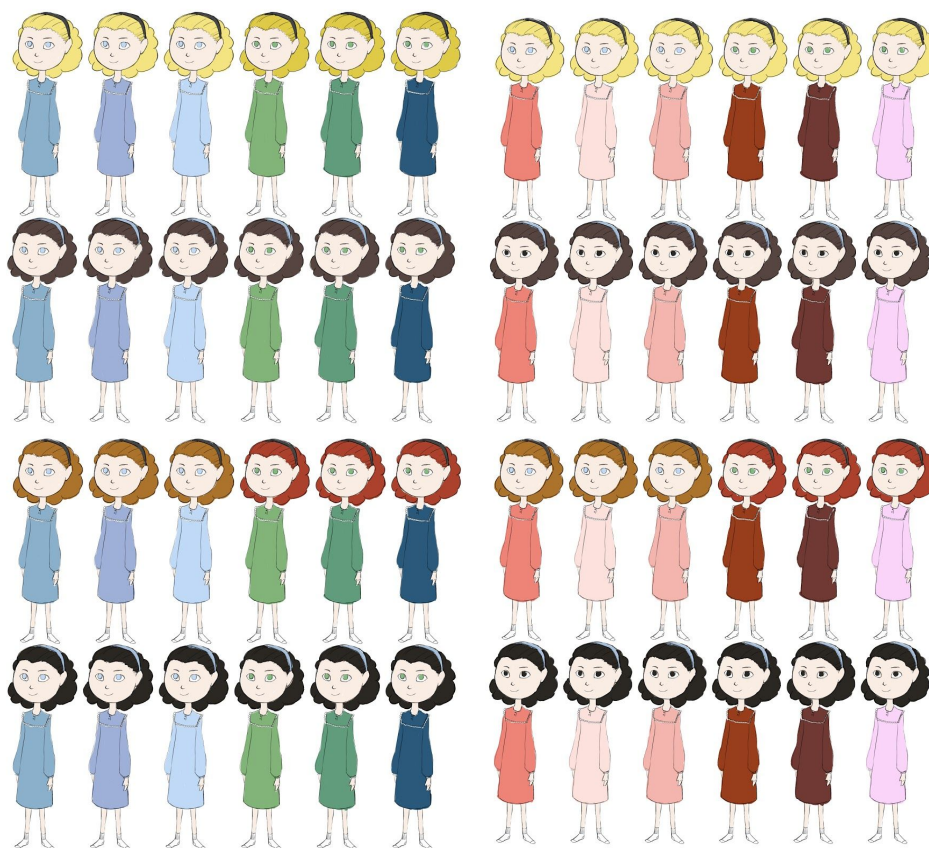
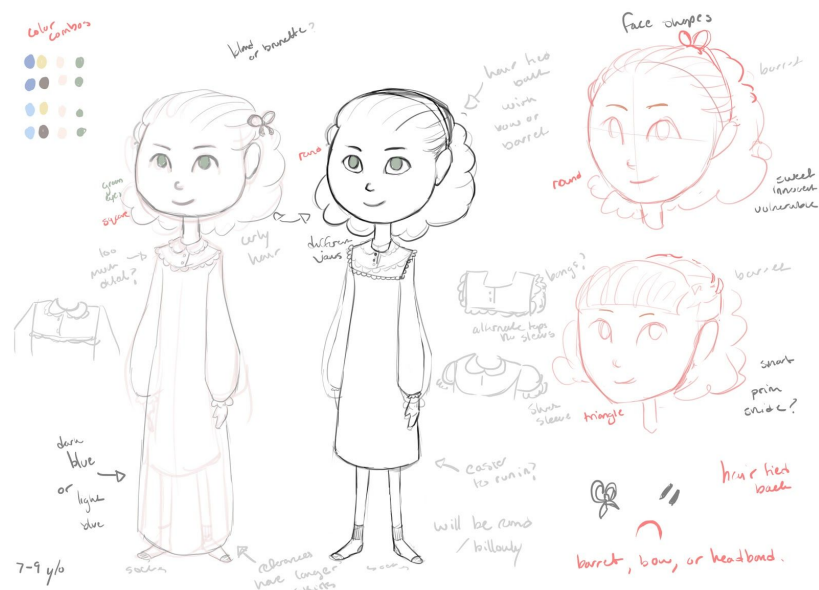


DIRECTED AND ANIMATED BY
RENÉE LEVASSEUR









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